



Online Identity

By Christina Behnke

Confident in “old school” skills, fashion lover and knitter Holly Olmstead navigates social media like a pro.

She's known on Ravelry as The Yarnista, and fellow members refer to her by username. “I searched eBay to obtain this pattern [for the Calvin Klein hound's-tooth suit from *Vogue Knitting* Fall/Winter 1988],” said one user. “This was after seeing The Yarnista modeling it.” “Yeah, she does that a lot,” responded another user. “The Yarnista... Talk about *Vogue Knitting* mojo/inspiration!”

With a penchant for arty patterns—and a collection of photographs in which she models her hand knits with panache—Buffalo, New York, teacher Holly Olmstead has gained recognition through her blog, Holly Knits, and on Ravelry's message boards. When a fellow group member wrote to her saying she'd love to tour her closet, Olmstead wrote back, “Just go to my page. My page *is* my closet.”

Olmstead began sewing clothes in fifth grade—resulting in a preference for seams—but didn't pick up a pair of knitting needles until college, in the midst of Buffalo's infamous blizzard of 1977. Worried about an elderly neighbor, she walked through the snow to check on her and discovered the woman knitting. Olmstead was captivated. Her neighbor taught her the basics, and when *Vogue Knitting* was reintroduced a few years later, it was a natural fit: Olmstead owns every issue of the magazine since Fall/Winter 1982. “My love for fashion just turned into knitting,” she says.

Olmstead joined Ravelry in 2008. (Feeling confined by the social networking platform, she began blogging in 2012 so she could write about what inspires her knitting projects. “I'm of the age when you start thinking about your legacy,” she says.) Her Projects page runs the gamut of this publication's most challenging and avant-garde projects. Though her self-professed “old-school” knitting habits make her something of an anomaly in the online knitting world—“I'm a one-project girl,” says Olmstead, who sets deadlines for herself and never casts on a second project until the first is complete—the Internet has proved a valuable resource for one of her fundamental knitting rules: Never substitute yarns. “With the [proliferation] of [online shopping sites] over the past decade, I've always been able to get the exact yarn the pattern calls for.” She's purchased yarn online from retailers as far away as Europe, and her stash, she says, is only waiting to be knitted into pre-planned projects.

“I don't know why, but I tend to be attracted to the patterns that few people on Ravelry are attracted to,” she says. “But I kind of like knowing that. What might stop somebody else doesn't stop me.” She cites her many years of knitting experience—and ambivalence toward the site's heart-shaped “Favorite” book-marking function—as the source of her confidence. “I've made the mistakes. I know what works [on my body type] and what doesn't. So I don't mind. I'm

almost motivated [by that] because I'm kind of stubborn. I'm just so driven to make work what I know could or might.”

But what really sets the knitter apart is her project photographs, shot by her husband at various locales and often set outdoors. As backdrop to Jeannie Chin's fluffy #27 Dolman Hoodie from Fall 2012, knit in white, they shot next to



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the icy Niagara River; for Mari Lynn Patrick's equestrian #12 Tunic Vest from Early Fall 2010, they sought out a centaur statue at the Buffalo History Museum. “I have a vision of how I want the photos to look,” she says. To show how the knitted piece works in an outfit, she always includes a full-body shot; posing, she seems barely able to contain her enthusiasm. “It's not just [about] the knitted piece,” she says. “It's how it's working in my life and in my wardrobe.”

No matter how long ago the patterns were published, most of the projects Olmstead shares online were knitted and photographed in the past five years. (“When I get my heart set on something, the love affair just does not end,” she says of Carol Covington's #15 Shaped Eyelet Cardigan from Fall/Winter 1988, which she knit in 2013.) But recently, Olmstead posted a few scanned photos—



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casual snapshots of family life in the mid-1980s—in which she happens to be wearing extravagant intarsia pullovers. The photos reveal that her love for off-beat hand knits was established long before the concept of “project photo” took off—as a caveat to one post, her only-existing picture of her #51 Muppet Pull-over from Fall/Winter 1983, she apologizes that her young daughter is blocking the Kermit the Frog motifs. “You’re talking years and years and years of no Ravelry,” she says. “I didn’t know that this would exist.”

Olmstead explains how social media challenged her to take a new approach to project photography. Upon joining Ravelry, she uploaded pictures of her #2 Cabled Bolero, designed by Norah Gaughan for Winter 2006/07. The project “didn’t get any attention at all,” despite the fact that it was “actually very successful: the way it fits, the way it looks, the compliments I get.” Sometime later, she asked her husband to reshoot it, and this time, they headed outdoors, into natural light. Suddenly, her project page received an outpouring of Favorites. To date, it has been viewed more than 1,000 times. “It’s the same girl, it’s the same project, it’s the same yarn, it’s the same everything, but it was the photograph itself that made the difference. That tells me there’s a whole other skill set you really need for online sharing of knitting projects.”

Still, she’s wary of the type of environment this can create. “Why did I feel the need to reshoot it?” she continues. “That was the competitiveness in me, and I don’t like that. I want it to be my fun.” She acknowledges that her statement-making knits have become part of her identity. “I tend to go with the outlandish projects, because I know who I am. My husband says, ‘I don’t know what the heck you’ll be coming down the stairs in, but I love it all.’ If you’ve got confidence and your family is behind you, that’s huge,” she continues. “It goes back to that legacy: I want to be remembered for some of these statements I’m making.”

Olmstead is quick to point out that she’s “a knitter by hobby, by passion but not by trade, so I’ll take any and every tip.” Still, speaking about her upcoming retirement, she hints, “I’m not a designer—yet!” If she goes in that direction, we can expect that she’ll be all about fashion first. “I’m not a fiber artist,” she says. “I don’t want to dye yarn. I don’t want to tend the llama. I just want the yarn in a nice brown package, and I want that Tom Scott garment in the end. That’s what motivates me. I knit through the lens of fashion.”



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